

# Meeting the Gulf of Mexico Shellfish Challenge

## Using Strategic Assessment to Define Strategies and Target Watersheds for Shellfish Restoration

February 1996 Update

The Gulf of Mexico is the top shellfish-producing region in the nation, with over 27 million pounds of oysters landed in 1994 at a value of \$96 million. However, the 1995 *National Shellfish Register* indicates over half of the nine million acres of shellfish growing waters in the region have regulatory limitations on harvest due to a variety of reasons ranging from administrative rules to degraded water quality.

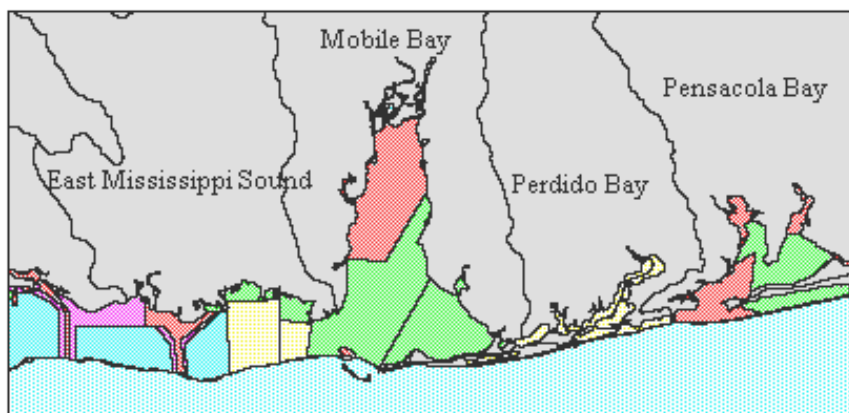
***The Shellfish Challenge Plan summarizes the consensus of over 50 regional specialists regarding shellfish restoration efforts. It will be released in March.***

The Gulf of Mexico Program, recognizing the importance of shellfish bed closures as an indicator of the potential decline in coastal water quality, has identified the restoration of shellfish acreage as one of its top environ-

mental objectives. This update presents the status of the first phase of this project — developing and targeting strategies for achieving the Shellfish Challenge.

### A Need for Assessment

The Shellfish Challenge seeks to “increase Gulf shellfish beds available for safe harvesting by 10 percent.” To achieve this ambitious goal, the Gulf of Mexico Program needed a way to determine where and how to most effectively direct its efforts to have the greatest impact on the shellfish closure problem. In February 1994, members of the Program formed a team with the Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) Division of NOAA's Office of Ocean Resources Conservation and Assessment (ORCA) to undertake a “strategic assessment” of the issues impacting shellfish bed closures in the Gulf region. The assessment set out to identify, on a Gulfwide basis, the highest-priority strategies for



Harvest Classification    ■ Conditionally Approved    ■ Prohibited  
■ Approved    ■ Conditionally Restricted    ■ Restricted    ■ Unclassified

Harvest classification information from the 1995 *Shellfish Register* was used extensively by regional specialists to develop and target restoration strategies.



### Top Shellfish Strategies

ID	Strategy Title
PS-1	Connect poorly operating septs to WWTPs
PS-5	Reduce inputs of FCBs in runoff from densely populated areas
HE-1	Use existing reservoirs and/or diversions to impact salinities > 25 ppt
HE-2	Enhance cultch/substrate in areas with 10-25 ppt salinity
M-4	Develop improved risk assessment system for shellfish

addressing the problem, the watersheds where these strategies could be applied, the actions needed to implement them, and the information required for them to be effective.

The assessment was considered “strategic” because it sought to define the scale and scope of problems across the watersheds of the Gulf. It brought together stakeholders (including local and regional experts) with relevant data in a structured process designed to identify the most feasible strategies to meet the Challenge, while taking into account time and resource constraints and competing priorities.

### Building Consensus

Two regional workshops were organized to bring together a variety of regional “experts” to

develop viable environmental strategies directed at the goal. The first, held in New Orleans in April 1995, was used to identify the major issues affecting shellfish harvest restrictions. Strategies were developed by three breakout groups covering issues related to: 1) pollution sources; 2) habitat enhancement; and 3) public health and resource management. Together, these groups identified and ranked 33 strategies that could be implemented to address the shellfish issues identified.

complete the data collection and review process needed to draft the Shellfish Challenge Plan.

The strategy ranking process identified five top strategies among the 13 highly ranked ones (see front sidebar). The criteria for selection varied by group, but included an assessment of the severity of the problem that the strategy addressed, the regional importance of the strategy, the likelihood that successful implementation would lead to upgrades in growing water classification or increase in shellfish habitat, and the feasibility of successfully implementing the strategy. In addition, the groups targeted and rated watersheds for their potential as candidates for strategy implementation, based on the available background data and their expert knowledge. Watersheds with the most promise for implementation

The next step in the process (see above) is to develop detailed tactical implementation plans for selected watersheds to determine exactly what costs, regulations, and timing would have to be considered for the strategies to be successfully implemented.

For more information on meeting the Shellfish Challenge, contact either the Gulf of Mexico Program's Chief of science and technology Fred Kopfler (EPA) at (601) 688-2712 or Daniel Farrow of NOAA's SEA Division at (301) 713-3000, x156.